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Provisional

Miroslav Šašek

Martin Salisbury

An introduction to Miroslav Šašek, the world-famous creator of the *This Is...* series of children's books.

119 illustrations

24.5 x 18.7cm

112pp

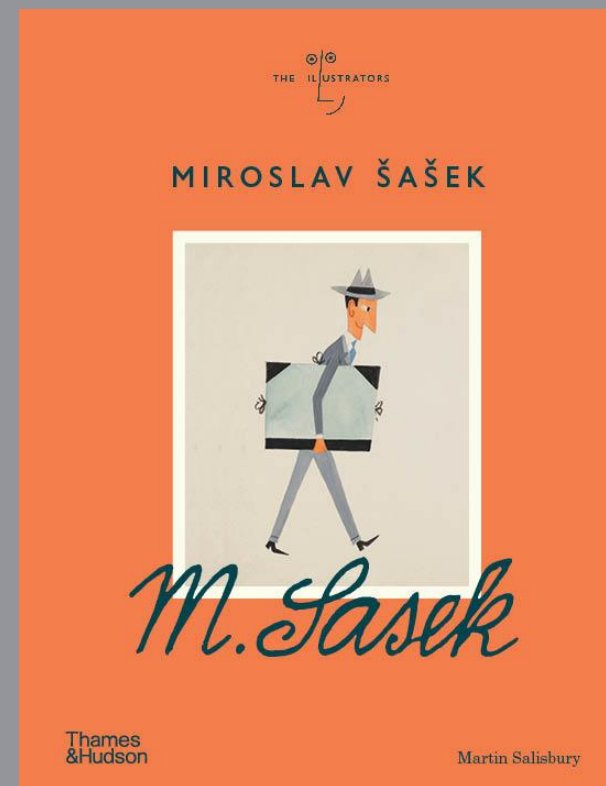
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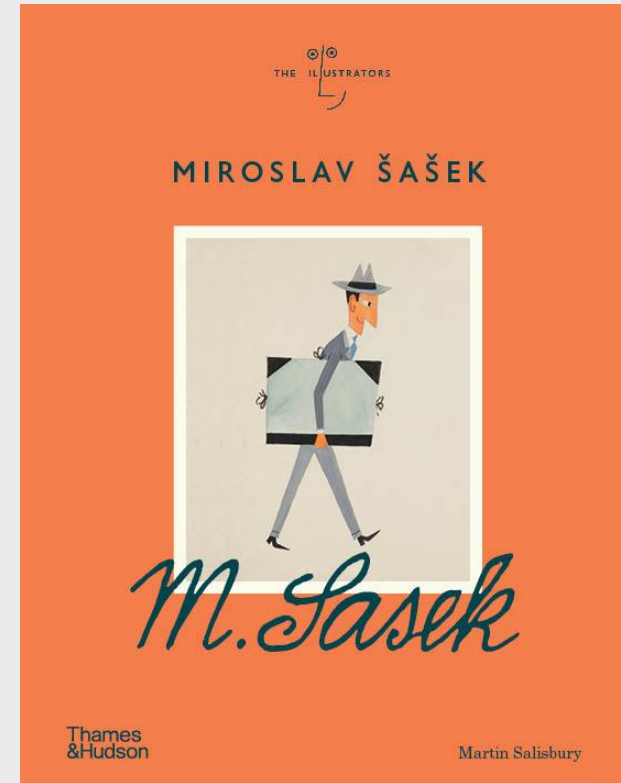
Book

Praise for Miroslav Šašek

‘For a large number of humans on earth, their first cultural encounter with the feeling of many cities or countries, came from the pens and brushes of Miroslav Šašek.

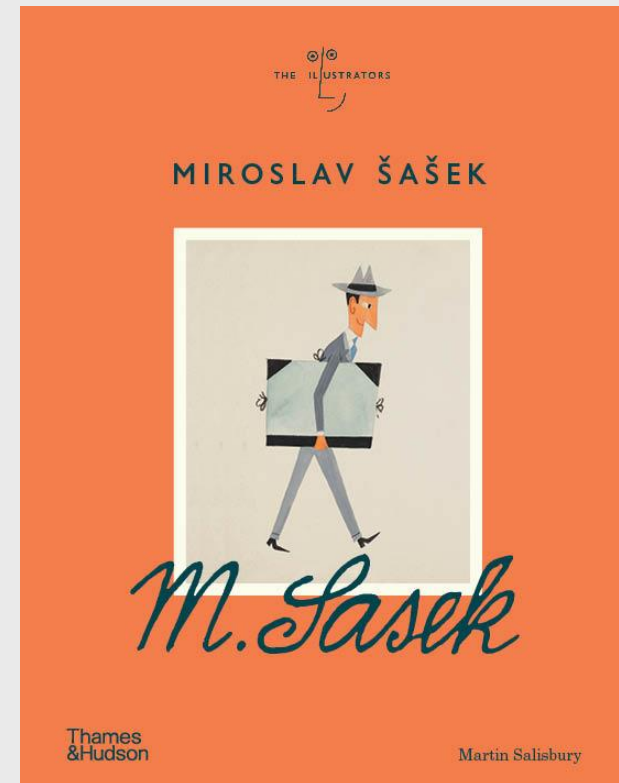
Paintings and drawings that were part realism, part gestural, but entirely convincing and always charming’

Oliver Jeffers



Key Sales Points

- Current trends for 'retro' illustration and design owe much to the work of Šašek.
- Šašek's distinctive visual language is beloved around the world.
- Written by a bestselling author of books on the history and practice of illustration, who has close ties with the Šašek Foundation.
- Features substantial critical analysis of Šašek's life and work.





FRONT COVER Opening vignette from *This is Paris*, 1959
 BACK COVER Miroslav Šašek in his studio, 1961

FRONTPIECE Cover, *This is Paris*, 1959
 ABOVE Title page illustration from *Novely*, 1947
 PAGE 112 Closing vignette from *This is Historic Britain*, 1974

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 Foundation

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CONTENTS

Introduction	6
Early childhood and education	8
The 1930s and wartime	11
Into exile	18
<i>This is</i> – the early days	29
A new family	50
A growing reputation	55
Success and acclaim	68
Changing times	74
Other projects	90
The later years	101

Notes	108
Select bibliography	108
Chronology	109
Acknowledgments	109
Picture credits	109
Contributors	110
Index	110

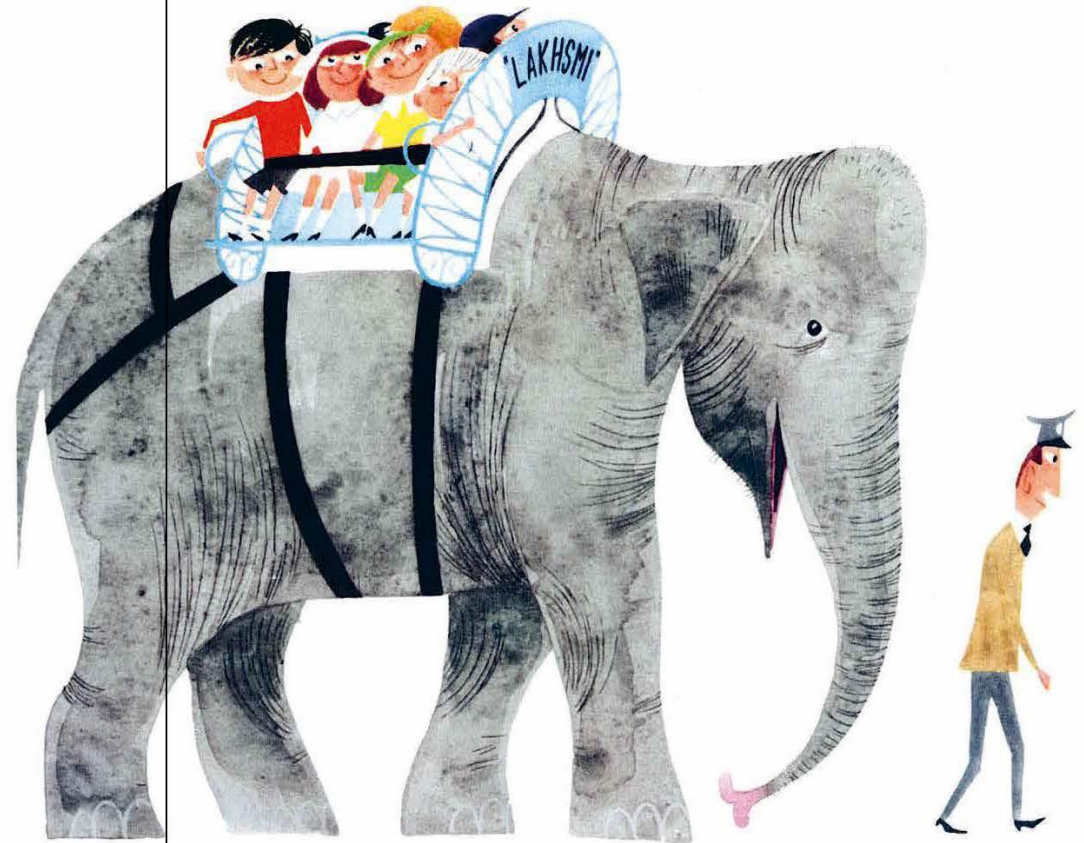
Throughout the years spent on his better-known 'travel books', Šašek continued to paint in oils. These canvases, often large-scale, reveal a very different, more muted, even sombre vision. And it is clear that in his later years he was working on personal projects involving various animal characterizations that show yet more artistic personalities. It is reasonable to suppose that the demands on his time that came with his commercial success curtailed other possible lines of creative enquiry.

Miroslav Šašek the man remains something of an enigma. It is through the printed page that we can come closest to this mysterious wandering exile who, from his hotel rooms around the world, reported back with his pencil and watercolours to generations of children and adults a sense of 'being there'. He did so with wit, charm and a lightness of touch that retains its appeal even in an age of mass travel and fingertip availability of photographic and moving imagery from every corner of our planet.

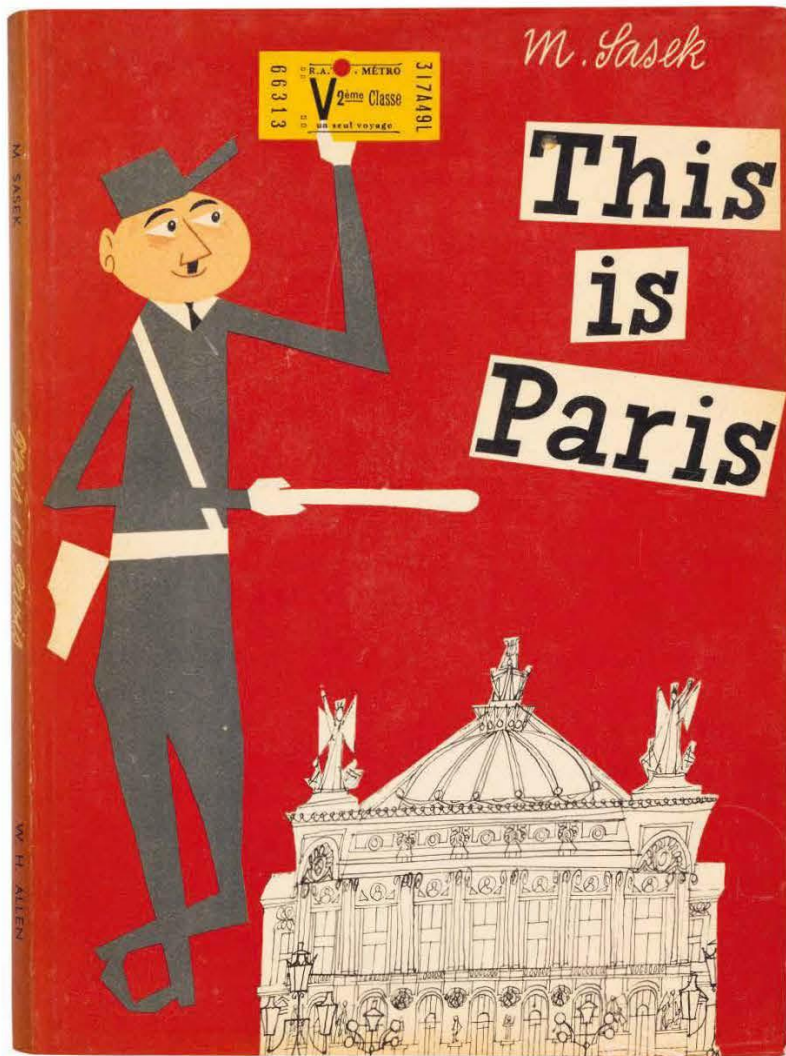
Early childhood and education

Miroslav Šašek was born to Alois and Anna Marie Šašek (née Nováková) on 16 November 1916 in Žižkov, a district of Prague. They had married the previous year. In early childhood Miroslav and his younger sister, Věra, lived for a time in Sedlčany, a small town to the south of Prague in central Bohemia. Alois worked there as an office manager at an insurance company. But after he died of pneumonia in 1926 at the age of 41, Anna Marie moved back to Žižkov with the children and returned to her work as a Czech-German translator. The 10-year-old Miroslav or Mirek, as friends called him, grew up in this gritty working-class area of dense streets that still has a reputation for being bohemian and 'alternative'.

From an early age Miroslav loved drawing and resolved to become an artist. At high school he demonstrated his excellence in the subject while not performing too impressively in other areas. He was determined to go to art school but the family was concerned about the precarious and unpredictable life of the artist and encouraged the



OPPOSITE
Illustration from
This is London, 1959

*This is – the early days*

In the mid-1950s Šašek and Jindřiška divorced and soon afterwards Miroslav returned to Paris, via a brief stay in Bruges. The reason he gave for leaving Radio Free Europe was a desire to 'devote his full time to his career as a painter'.⁴ His paintings in the years 1957–59 are rendered in sombre dark greens, browns and grey-blues, with hints of the influence of Georges Rouault and Amedeo Modigliani. The depictions of Belgian and Parisian streets, figure compositions and graphic constructions, are essentially drawings made in paint, heavily dependent on black line emerging from under the layers of oil. Clearly, this was a period of hardship for the artist. He was often too cold to paint and at one point was unable to afford the fare to travel back to Munich to attend the opening of an exhibition of his paintings. He had been invited to be the inaugural exhibitor at a newly established cultural centre for refugees from countries now behind the Iron Curtain.

However, the idea for a 'kiddies' guide to Paris, as Šašek referred to it, continued to evolve. Through the concept's lengthy gestation period his visual language had inevitably been changing and he had reworked the project into a more image-led picturebook format. Šašek was now ready to show the book to potential publishers. He enlisted the help of Prague-born Frank Stuart Viner (originally called Wiener) as a middleman to present his work to London firms. Jeffrey Simmons, at the time a young employee with the publishers W. H. Allen, recalls his first momentous encounter with Šašek's work:

I was working for W. H. Allen in Essex Street in central London, in 1957 I think it was. I was about 30 years old at the time. Frank Stuart Viner was a successful entrepreneur. He had seen something in our window that he liked, and he came through the door and asked to show us something that he had with him. It was a mock-up dummy of This is Paris. As a company, we didn't publish children's books in those days, but I immediately recognized the quality of the work and we agreed to publish it. I also got

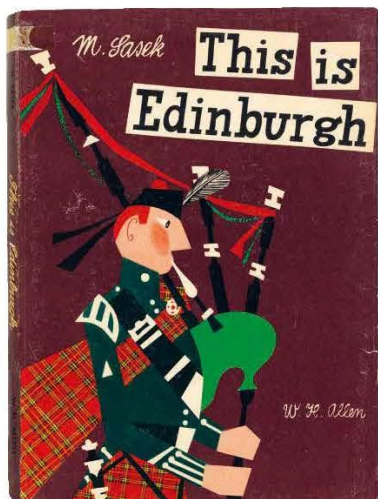
OPPOSITE

Cover, *This is Paris*, 1959



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE
Illustrations from *Zvonokosy*
(*Clochemerle*), 1948, and *This is*
Paris, 1959, showing the recycling
of a composition





influenced by developments in the fine arts. The flat, angular shapes evident in Šašek's *This is* books embraced the European avant-garde, the traditional representational painting and architectural drawing of his training at the Czech Technical University as well as the influence of contemporary graphic artists such as Ronald Searle, Saul Steinberg and André François.

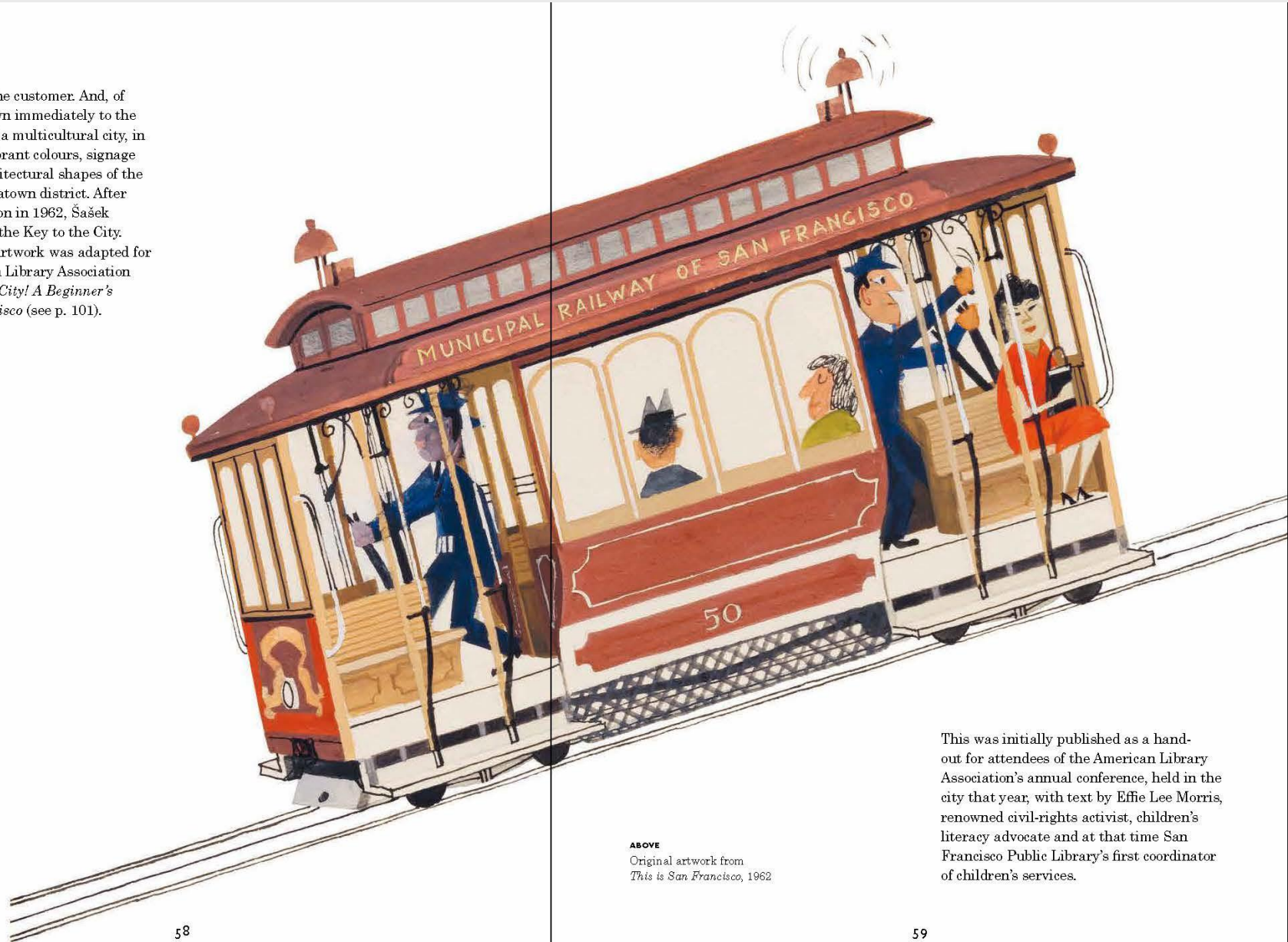
The trip to Edinburgh in 1961 was one of Šašek's favourites – 'I loved working on *This is Edinburgh*, though I hated the weather there. In the middle of summer, it was cold and rainy. You needed a hot-water bottle in bed with you. Working conditions were good though because the nights are very short in Edinburgh. I worked from 4 a.m. to midnight and finished the book in two months.⁸ The intensity of the work condensed into that short period led to one of the most pleasing books in the series. Against a backdrop of the city's signature darkened sandstone buildings, Šašek finds vibrant colours in school uniforms, everyday clothing and ceremonial outfits, and contrasts them to great effect.



ABOVE LEFT
Cover, *This is Edinburgh*, 1961

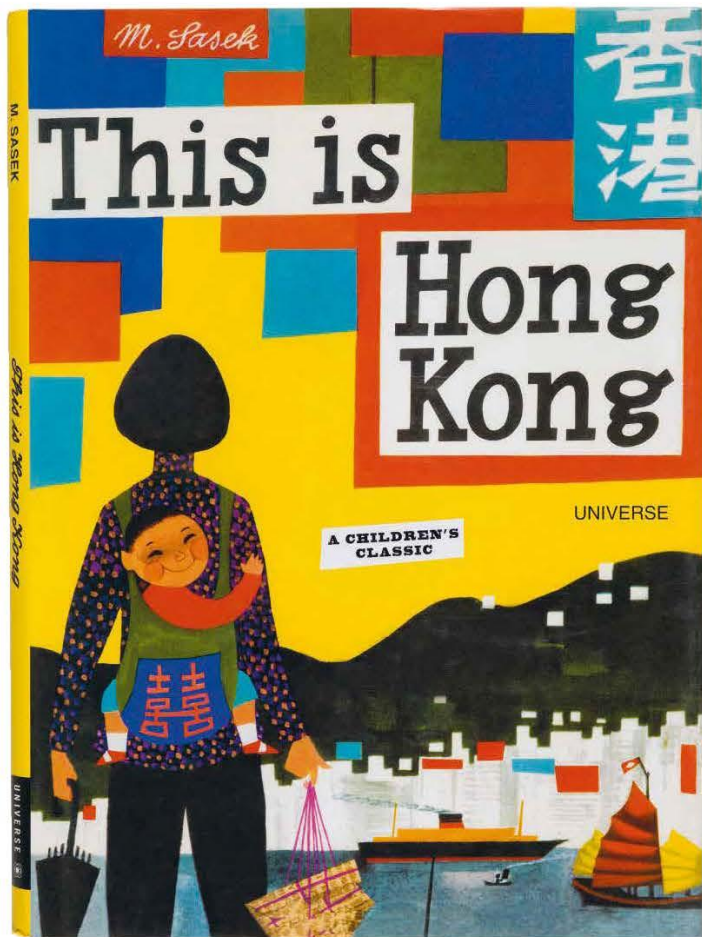
ABOVE RIGHT AND OPPOSITE
Original artwork from
This is Edinburgh, 1961

before giving it to the customer. And, of course, he was drawn immediately to the graphic diversity of a multicultural city, in particular to the vibrant colours, signage and decorative architectural shapes of the city's bustling Chinatown district. After the book's publication in 1962, Šašek returned to receive the Key to the City. Later, in 1967, his artwork was adapted for use in the American Library Association publication *See the City! A Beginner's Guide to San Francisco* (see p. 101).



ABOVE
Original artwork from
This is San Francisco, 1962

This was initially published as a hand-out for attendees of the American Library Association's annual conference, held in the city that year, with text by Effie Lee Morris, renowned civil-rights activist, children's literacy advocate and at that time San Francisco Public Library's first coordinator of children's services.



ABOVE
Cover, *This is
Hong Kong*, 1965

OPPOSITE
Original artwork from
This is Hong Kong, 1965



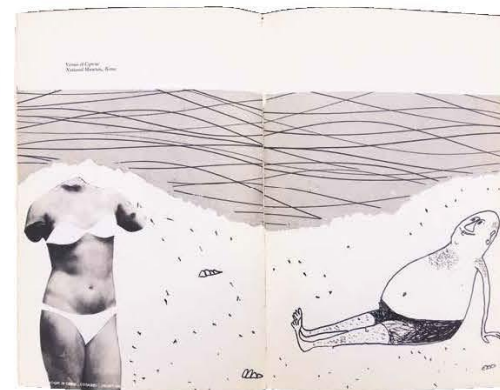
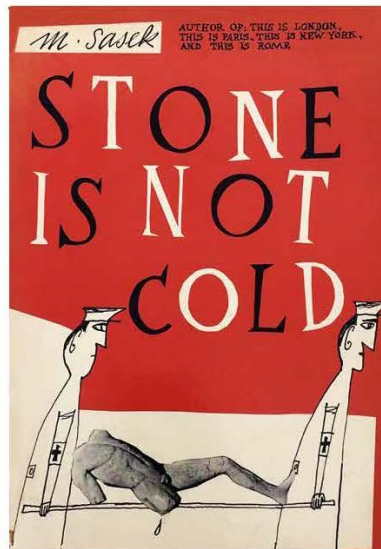
Other projects

Miroslav Šašek's career as the author-illustrator of an internationally acclaimed series of picture guidebooks left relatively little time for other endeavours. When not completing a *This is* title, he seemed to devote himself primarily to his oil paintings. But there were a few significant graphic projects that were spread over the period from the first *This is* publication and which collectively give some clues as to the wider possibilities for his work, had time allowed.

The first, and possibly most intriguing of these, is *Stone is not Cold*. Published in 1961 by W. H. Allen in the UK and Citadel Press in the USA, the book is printed entirely in black and white with a second colour of burgundy used on the cover, and is now much sought after by collectors as a stand-alone work of graphic wit for older readers. It is a sophisticated yet playful collection of black-and-white photo-collage of classical statuary combined with scrawled ink line drawings, complemented by mischievously subversive visual text. Statuary from around the world is stripped of its dignity by the intervention of the artist's deliberately sketchy line drawings, which place the sculptures into modern environments and situations. Šašek makes visual links between the pose of each classical figure and some usually mundane everyday 1960s activity. The reclining Dionysus from the British Museum is relocated onto a quickly drawn toboggan, hurtling down a snowy slope; the raised arm of Augustus from the Vatican's Museum of Antiquities is redeployed to serve coffee to an expectant customer in a bar while the statue of Julius Caesar normally found in the Capitoline Museum in Rome is here hitching a lift from his speeding museum statue co-habitant, 'Portrait of a Roman Lady', fast approaching in a rather stylish sports car.

More obviously related to what was now becoming a burgeoning body of work for W. H. Allen and Macmillan was Šašek's collaboration with the scholar of the history of the ancient city of Pompeii, and professor at the University of Maryland, Wilhelmina Feemster Jashemski. *Letters from Pompeii* was published in 1963 by Ginn & Co. in Boston. Subtitled 'A Ginn social studies enrichment book', its lengthy

OPPOSITE
Cover and pages from *Stone is not Cold*, 1961



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